

BLEEDING THE MAN WHO BUILDS

THEODORE STARRETT TELLS HOW THE SUB-CONTRACT DOES THE JOB

Change Your Plans and the Money Flows—Conservatory, Estimating, etc.—That Cost \$250,000. If Put Up—Bank Which Overran \$1,500,000—Answer to Critics

Theodore Starrett, the builder and contractor, who has been the victim of the tactics of groups in the Building Trades Employers' Association, of which he himself is a member, explained yesterday in an interview the process which has demoralized the workmen's organizations and the effectiveness of individual laborers and has made owners and prospective builders in the building trade, with the result that owners fail to begin a building, and thousands of competent workmen are out of work altogether, or are working on half time.

In the ordinary process of things an owner who wants to put up a building makes a first contract with a builder with an architect, and the builder comes in later. To this general building contractor falls the duty of selecting sub-contractors for all the different sorts of work to be done on the building, such as masonry, carpentry, plastering, steam fitting, electric wiring, plumbing, and the like. These are all done under the architect's and the general contractor's estimates as to cost. There is an agreement by the sub-contractor that he will do for a set sum just such work as is described in the specifications. There is also an agreement in each sub-contract that it may be terminated on short notice by the owner or the general contractor.

Mr. Starrett says that there has arisen such a condition that the sub-contracting business that this clause about the power of the builder or owner to terminate a sub-contract is a mere joke at the owner's expense. He illustrates by a concrete case, thus:

"Let us consider a man who has, through his general contractor, made a deal with a plumber, one of thirty or more sub-contractors. The plumber, in this case, a Chinaman. Mr. Starrett calls the members of the employers' association competition killing crowd 'Chinamen' because, he says, they are building a Chinese wall around the building industry. In the course of erection of the building he finds that it is necessary to change the specifications in some way, say to add some plumbing, say about \$100 worth. He tells the plumber about it and the plumber says that the price of that work will be \$1,000.

"The owner protests with great indignation. The sub-contractor explains that the previous work on the contract has been done at a loss and that the \$1,000 is not for the value of the extra work but to make up for previous losses. The owner refuses to take this excuse and invokes the clause of his contract which permits him to drop the sub-contractor on twenty-four hours' notice.

All right—much good it does him. He can go up and down the town for a month, but he cannot find another plumber to take up that contract. They will all say 'You have made your contract with another man, let him have the job.' Then there are three courses open to the owner. First, he may get a sub-contractor who is outside of the association; second, he may undertake to hire his own men, pay them full union wages, and finish the job on his own responsibility; third, he may give in and submit to the \$1,000 imposition.

"The third course is the cheapest for him in the end, because, just so surely as he gets a plumber outside of the employers' association, or just so soon as he attempts to do the work with men he hires on his own account, the wage-making begins.

"The walking delegate appears with orders that the union cannot permit the work to go on. If the delegate is placated it will cost a more than \$1,000 to complete the sub-contract; if he is not placated, the sub-contract may never be completed, except at a cost which is beyond all rhyme and reason."

It must be remembered, Mr. Starrett explains, that the plumbing contract is only one of thirty sub-contracts, any one of the thirty contracts may make necessary a change in any one of the others. Any change in any contract may make the excuse for the extortionate addition to the contract price. This the sub-contractors have a complete grip upon the owner.

In a way the contractors, Mr. Starrett says, divide their unjust profits with the mechanics. In order to get the cooperation of the labor unions and the walking delegates of the extortionate addition to the contract price, the sub-contractors have a complete grip upon the owner.

"No man with a building enterprise in mind," said Mr. Starrett, "can have to-day any definite idea how much it will cost to carry out his plans. If he is purposely liberal in his estimates he may know that the members of the extortionate league will take his liberty as a first class class and will liberally increase their demands upon him. Here is an example, one which is not regarded as in any way startling by those who have followed the way things have been going.

"A well known man in this city, who himself has had no small experience as a contractor, desired to remodel his house. He wanted to build a conservatory extension, the architect's estimate on the job was \$25,000. The architect thought these additions would cost \$3,500 under the existing contracts. The work began on January 1st.

"It was quite apparent to the owner that the \$3,500 limit was being exceeded. The architect limited it but counselled patience. When the bill had run up to \$25,000 the owner's patience exploded under the strain. He sent for the architect and read the riot act to him. The architect made some careful estimates, and said that at the rate of the sub-contractor's increasing scale of charges he did not see how the job could be done under \$35,000.

"The owner was angry but helpless. He said: 'Go ahead.' But he watched his bill. They went up to \$35,000 and beyond. He discharged the architect. Then he undertook to finish the job on his own responsibility. He finished the job, but the cost of the operation came to just about \$83,000, or more than twenty times as much as it should have amounted to.

"There is a second story extension which cost more than \$1,500,000 more than the owners intended it should. The improvements on the building of a great insurance company to remodel the old building, \$5,000,000 above the sum which competent architects felt those improvements ought to cost.

Mr. Starrett holds that it is such facts as these which make it impossible for owners with unlimited capital to undertake building operations so large that they say that no man will build in these days if he can help it. If any builder approaches an owner saying 'See here, I will promise you that our work will keep within our estimates, and that if it does not I will stand the loss' is immediately met by all sorts of insinuations from cunning contractors and favored architects with the general intimation that his work is not trustworthy, that it is shoddy, that such a builder cannot do his work without employing unworthy mechanics and using shoddy materials.

"The great pity of all this," says Mr. Starrett, "is that the owner is robbed by wholesale in order that the contractors may steal by retail. When the owner pays out \$100 cents he gets 20 cents of the work. The sub-contractors of the Chinese League get five cents legitimately and ten cents illegitimately the rest is wasted. It is a policy of waste, waste, waste."

The workmen stand for it, in a way, because the scale of wages is increased. But so many men are thrown out of work that the general condition of the working man is much worse than if the scale of wages were much lower. The few who are lucky enough to get work prosper, but the thousands who are out of work suffer. There is just one cure for the whole situation. It is for the establishment of a form of contract by which the contractors and the sub-contractors stand by their contracts and possible changes in their contracts, even at the expense of standing the loss occasioned by changes.

It was hardly to be expected that an institution which makes its power felt by unscrupulous means could be attacked with impunity by any single individual. The function of the wage-maker makes itself felt in very much the same way as does the Mafia or the Mafia Magiuro. When the contractor is attacked, the answer is silence, with a stab in the back from some ambush.

"Only one public answer has been made to my statements in regard to the building industry in the building trade in New York city, and that was by a gentleman who stated that his letter was written in his individual capacity and not as a representative of any institution, although it is probable that the letter had been rehearsed and gone over by the leading spirits in the organization. It is not necessary that it was actually the statement of the organization.

"No Mafia business can be worked except by the aid of the Mafia, and the Mafia is a dangerous business. If any one attempts any unscrupulous action against me he will find that it will not be the delegate that will be dragged to the light, but it will be the man who bribed the delegate, and that is why I am safe.

The accounts of starving workmen and hustled unions, to which have been the last three or four days more than prove the truth of my statements in regard to the building business, viz., that it is in a demoralized condition, and that where there should be a boom, with plenty of work for everybody, investors are so scared and so dissatisfied that they will not spend their money on buildings.

"There have been three anonymous attacks on me. I tell them anonymous because one was actually signed by a walking delegate and in the other case by a member of the Mason Builders' Association, who probably does not know what has been going on. And here let me state that it is to be regretted that the rings that control this business should withdraw themselves into the body of their fellow builders and so make it impossible to hit up the conspirator without smashing a way out of the honest men and dishonest, too, for that matter, in every builders' organization. I say that I am sorry that these things must be said, and I also say that these things are said for the good of the industry and of every man, Chinaman or American, who forms a part of it.

"The anonymous attacks referred to, all of which are quite evidently from the same source, an attempt was made, and a very clever one, too, to throw in the eyes of the public and to lead them away from the main issue. The public can judge as to this. When a man in an argument starts to vilify the other party there is only one conclusion to be drawn, and that is that he knows of no other argument.

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THE TELEGRAPH IN WARFARE.

GEN. GREELY TALKS TO SOLDIERS ON "LINES OF INFORMATION."

Discusses, at Governors Island, the Importance of Keeping Army Headquarters in Communication With Detachments—Plan for "Wiring" an Army

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Gen. Greely's paper was on "Lines of Information," which, he said, in warfare of the future must cover all telegraphic censorship, the general control of mails, the construction, operation and maintenance of telegraph lines, balloons and visual signaling.

Gen. Greely had some comments to make upon the preparedness of other nations in respect to this branch of the service, declaring that the United States has led them. Germany, he said, has been quick to take advantage of our experiences, reorganizing her signal service after the civil war and the Spanish war. As to Great Britain, Gen. Greely pointed out that her service is sadly defective, although Lord Wolsey has repeatedly urged his country to reorganize it.

All that any one would say after the meeting was that any action to be taken with regard to Mr. Starrett had been left to the emergency committee, to which full power had been given. Gen. Greely, president of the employers' association, after a consultation with some of its other officers, said: "It has been decided to do nothing until the emergency committee considers the matter. That committee will meet tomorrow."

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